

## RESEÑAS

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COMPLUTENSE

Jiménez, Enrique, *The Babylonian Disputation Poems. With Editions of the Series of the Poplar, Palm and Vine, the Series of the Spider, and the Story of the Poor, Forlorn Wren*. Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 87. Leiden / Boston, Brill, 2017, 526 pp. ISBN: 978-90-04-33625-4.

*The Babylonian Disputation Poems* is an important new work by Enrique Jiménez on the corpus of Mesopotamian wisdom literature. This work primarily presents editions for the first time of disputation poems discovered since the publication of W. G. Lambert's classic *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (1960). Jiménez did not re-edit texts for which new manuscripts have not been found nor did he re-edit texts that have seen new editions recently. Consequently, this work usefully supplements, but unfortunately does not entirely replace, the disputation poem section in *BWL*. That being said, this edition of the poems drastically supersedes the introductory material and notes that Lambert provided in *BWL* (which Jiménez notes are «extremely laconic», p. 5), devoting 150 pages alone to contextualizing the genre. This book therefore will be indispensable not only to those narrowly interested in disputation poems, but also to those more broadly interested in Near Eastern wisdom literature and Mesopotamian literature and poetry.

The book is arranged in Parts (I-VI), with the introductory material making up Part I («The Mesopotamian Disputation Poems»), individual editions making up Parts II-V (respectively, «The Series of the Poplar», «Palm and Vine», «The Series of the Spider», «The Story of the Poor, Forlorn Hen»), and Part VI («Fragments with Literary Disputation») comprising a miscellany of tablets that did not fit elsewhere. It may have been useful instead to designate the introductory material Part I and the editions Part II, since this set-up necessitates designating the subsections of each edition as «chapters», which is unnecessarily cumbersome. The book also includes an appendix (written by Aaron Butts) that features an introduction, text, translation, and commentary on a Syriac disputation poem between a cedar tree and a vine. Oddly, this appendix appears after the bibliography. These (small) critiques are obviously immaterial to the appreciation of Jiménez's deep and careful scholarship but will partly explain the idiosyncrasies of this review.

Part I is split into an introduction and six chapters. The introduction briefly lays out Jiménez's intention to present editions of tablets of disputation poems that have appeared since the publication of *BWL*, but not to re-edit other texts in the genre. In practical terms, the only text from *BWL* that appears in this work is «The Series of the Poplar» (or, as designated in *BWL*, the «willow»). New fragments of «The Series of the Fox» have appeared, and are duly edited individually, but a new full, composite text has not been presented. Despite the fact that new fragments of «Tamarisk and Palm» have come to light, Jiménez does not provide a new edition since he considers Wilcke's edition of 1989 to be sufficient.

The first chapter, «Definition of the Corpus», describes the internal structure of

disputation poems. Jiménez posits five central prerequisites for the genre: 1. they are poetic; 2. they have a tripartite structure: introduction, disputation, adjudication; 3. the second section is comprised (almost entirely of) dialogue; 4. the disputants are «inarticulate, such as animals, trees, seasons, or concepts. When the litigants are humans, they are usually types rather than actual people» (p. 11); 5. the purpose of the disputation is to establish which of the disputants is superior.

The second chapter, «Sumerian Disputation Poems», briefly discusses all known exemplars, commonly believed to be the generic forefather of the Babylonian ones. However, there does not seem to be any overlap in content between the Sumerian and Babylonian poems, so Akkadian speakers simply inherited the form and not the specific poems from the Sumerians. The only partial exception is the case of «Tamarisk and Palm», which Jiménez argues is clearly a school exercise in which a student translated the poem from Akkadian into Sumerian rather than vice versa (p. 23). By and large, the Sumerian exemplars are preserved in a far better state than their Babylonian cousins – most are nearly completely preserved whereas all the Babylonian poems are extremely fragmentary. Therefore, the structure of disputation poems is most readily ascertained from the Sumerian poems.

The third chapter, «Akkadian Disputation Poems», surveys all the known poems in this language and provides a useful graph showing the attested dates of each of the poems. This chapter makes up somewhat for the fact that every known Babylonian disputation poem does not appear in the book since Jiménez provides in this section an excellent introduction to each of the poems that he does not re-edit (including «The Series of the Fox»). Each of these studies is nearly as long as the studies appended to the texts edited here for the first time.

The fourth chapter, «The Place of Disputation Poems within Babylonian Literature», is probably the most important portion of this book. Jiménez examines the tripartite structure of these poems in slightly more detail and also gives a brief introduction to what is known or presumed about Akkadian meter and verse structure. This last point Jiménez uses to great effect in analyzing disputation poems as literature. Too often scholars of the ancient Near East do not make serious use of literary theory in spite of the large amount of literature (in the sense of *belles lettres*) extant in the relevant corpora. That is not the case here. Drawing on critical studies on intertextuality as well as disputation poems found in other cultures and times, Jiménez argues that the Babylonian disputation poems served a parodic function. Jiménez focuses on the use of hymno-epic forms that appear in the disputation poems and sees this usage as striking a bathetic note when put in the mouth of animals and plants. While I am convinced that Jiménez is right that the disputation poems are parodic, I would have preferred to see more focus on specifics (especially in the individual studies attached to each text in Parts II-VI). What exactly is being parodied in any given text? Furthermore, looking through the bibliography, it is clear that Jiménez did not use theoretical work on the division between man and animal, such as Agamben's *The Open* or Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, or any scholars that look at the use of animals in literature. Considering the fact that the disputation poems feature animals taking part in human institutions such as judicial proceedings, the question should be asked: what did the writers of these works hope to accomplish by transgressing the boundaries between man and animal? Jiménez's argument could have been strengthened by recourse to these thinkers.

The fifth chapter, «*Sitz-im-Leben* of the Disputation Poem», focuses on what can be discovered concerning the wider context of disputation poems in Mesopotamian life. Jiménez discusses the entries in the so-called *Catalogue of Texts and Authors* that mention both disputation poems and their putative authors, and he concludes that little can be discovered from the *Catalogue*. Jiménez also notes the poems' find-spots in personal libraries as well as Assurbanipal's famous library at Nineveh. He also notes that disputation poems (circling back to the chart at the beginning of the last chapter) in Akkadian appear throughout the course of ancient Mesopotamian civilization as opposed to their Sumerian counterparts which have only been dated to the Old Babylonian period. Finally, Jiménez again brings in comparative data from other cultures, namely the Latin West of the Middle Ages, to further nuance our knowledge that Babylonian disputation poems were part of the scribal educational curricula. Similar Latin poems were composed during the Middle Ages and were also used in education. The utility of this genre stemmed from the fact that they were light-hearted and fun (so would retain the attention of children) while also introducing more formal subjects (Biblical quotations, judicial formulas, etc.) in a more informal fashion. Jiménez argues that the Babylonian disputation poems were used in Mesopotamian education in a similar fashion and for similar reasons.

The final chapter of Part I, «Mesopotamian Disputations in Later Traditions», focuses on the dissemination of Mesopotamian disputation poems into other cultures. Surprisingly, little time is spent on the Aesopic corpora. However, Jiménez tracks the genre through the other cultures of the Near East and Mediterranean. Jiménez notes that disputation poems are a rare genre when considered globally, however, a disproportionate number of cultures in which this genre is extant interacted with ancient Mesopotamia directly or indirectly. It is also important to note that all of the cultures that Jiménez examines have disputation poems that share the same Mesopotamian tripartite structure discussed above. Jiménez traces the spread of the genre from Mesopotamia through Aramaic, into Syriac and post-Biblical Hebrew/Jewish Aramaic. From Syriac, the genre spread to the other major Near Eastern languages (Arabic, Persian, and Turkish). The genre also appears in Medieval Latin texts, presumably passed on into Europe after the Arab conquest of Spain. Jiménez admits that there is no «smoking-gun» that explicitly links these disputation poem genres cross-culturally, however, the similarities between them are too great to be coincidence. Special attention in this regard ought to be paid to «Palm and Vine» (first appearing here), which seems to have lived on in some fashion after the death of cuneiform culture.

I will not discuss individually the remaining Parts (II-VI) since each is too diffuse to be summarized in any useful fashion. Each Part (aside from VI) is devoted to an edition of a single text. In addition to an eclectic text, each Part contains an introduction, beautifully drawn pictures of each manuscript, a philological commentary, and a «study», that discusses the disputants' identities along with myriad other topics. Part VI is more of a hodge-podge and contains fragments that may or may not belong to disputation poems. The largest portion of it contains new fragments of the «Series of the Fox» but no new eclectic text. Here the reader really wishes that Jiménez had included all known disputation poems since one now has to flip back and forth between *BWL* and Jiménez's new book to read the entirety of this important poem.

In short, this is an important new book on Akkadian poetry. Aside from the interesting new texts that he publishes for the first time, he has set this genre on a far better contextual footing and set a higher standard for how we ought to be trying to read the literary masterworks of ancient Mesopotamia.

Marcus Ziemann  
The Ohio State University